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RUEAHLA/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001178

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PARIS FOR JORDAN, LONDON FOR TSOU  
DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I, PRM/ANE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: UNHCR DONOR MISSION TO DAMASCUS: DONORS AIR  
LINGERING CONCERNS

REF: DAMASCUS 1157

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On December 2-3, UNHCR hosted 18 donor country representatives and attempted to give an updated assessment on the Iraqi refugee situation. UNHCR filled two days with meetings, site visits and official meetings. While the donors appeared sympathetic to the needs of the Iraqi refugees, many of the representatives raised concerns with UNHCR, Country Team members and the Syrian government that may hinder the release of additional relief aid. Donors were particularly concerned with the lack of hard statistics regarding refugee numbers and needs, expressed a desire for more unity among the Country Team members, and vented frustration over the lack of movement by the Syrian government on the issue of allowing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) license to operate within Syria's borders. End summary.

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Iraqi Refugees 101  
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12. (SBU) PolOff participated in a December 2-3 UNHCR program for 18 donor countries to observe UNHCR, Country Team members (UNFPA, UNRWA, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP and WHO) and NGOs assisting Iraqi refugees in Syria. The two-day mission included visits to the UNCHR Registration Center, Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) health clinics in Jeramanah and Sayidda Zeinab, Terre de Hommes (medical NGO providing prosthesis), Good Shepherd Convent (religious order providing assistance to and shelter for victims of gender-based violence), and the WFP-UNHCR-SARC food distribution center. Each entity gave a brief on their respective operations and Syrian government representatives met with donors to discuss concerns and needs.

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Positive UNHCR Effort  
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13. (SBU) During the two-day mission, donors expressed appreciation for UNHCR efforts to plus up its operation over the past year. Some notable achievements in 2007, as reported by senior UNHCR officials, include:

- the registration of over 90,000 refugees (bringing the total number registered to more than 140,000).
- the establishment of mobile registration teams.
- the launching of a food assistance program which is currently serving roughly 50,000 individuals, supporting nine Syrian Arab Red Crescent health clinics dedicated to refugee healthcare.
- the creation of an Iraqi outreach program staffed by Iraqi refugee volunteer workers.
- supporting two safe houses for survivors of gender based violence, giving non-food items to over 100,000 refugees.
- the rehabilitation of 100 schools.
- the establishment of regular financial assistance to over 10,000 of the most needy families.

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But Donors Concerned about Lack of Information  
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14. (C) In private meetings with donors and UNHCR Representative Laurens Jolles, donors expressed concern over the fact that no census had been completed for the Iraqi

refugees. Many donors told Jolles that the estimate of refugees (1.5 million) seemed unrealistic, particularly when compared to the number of registered Iraqis, and given that the estimate is derived, in part, from Syrian government statistics. Donors indicated that without an accurate assessment of the refugee population, it would be difficult to convince their respective capitals to release significant funds for assistance.

15. (C) Jolles replied by pointing to the studies UNHCR had conducted, along with several private studies. He expressed frustration with apparent lack of international support for Iraqi refugees in Syria, noting that the Iraqi population is significant, "give or take 200,000 Iraqis," and saying that an accurate count should not stand in the way of giving much needed support. Jolles argued the melding of Iraqi refugees into the lower and middle class of Syrian society (instead of in large refugee camps that confined Iraqis) was unique and thus difficult to quantify.

16. (C) The grumblings over the lack of hard statistics continued on the margins of the meeting. Many donors expressed their disappointment with the recent joint health sector appeal, saying that the UN was seeking a large sum of money (85 million USD) but had provided too little information in the appeal. The British representative, Tania Kelly, reported that the UK would not be donating to the appeal for this very reason. European Union delegate Julia Koch stressed the need for accurate numbers if the EU is to donate at the requested levels. Otherwise, many donor nations will lose the motivation to give money as there would be no way to diagnose the crisis and therefore no way to cure it, she commented.

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Internal IO Disputes Add to Donor Apprehension  
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17. (C) During several meetings, donors also expressed concern over the apparent lack of coordination between Country Team members. According to several donors, there appeared to be no coordinated strategic plan to solicit assistance. They noted that several Country Team members had issued separate funding appeals to donor countries.

¶8. (C) The donors indicated it was difficult for their countries to appropriately prioritize funding needs with so many organizations separately vying for resources. They also advocated a more unified approach on the part of the Country Team, suggesting that one entity should take charge, represent the Country Team as a whole, and advocate for all the needs of the refugees.

¶9. (C) For their part, Country Team members insisted that they were working in concert, but this did little to persuade donor reps, who privately disputed such claims insistentences, particularly, as one said, "Given what I've seen with my own eyes." The disharmony between Country Team members could not have been more apparent than during the group,s visit to the WFP food distribution center, where donors played audience to heated exchanges between UNHCR Senior Program Officer Ayman Gharabeih and WFP Program Officer Haithal el Noush.

¶10. (C) Arguing openly, Ayman criticized WFP's qualification criteria for those receiving food, and lamented that the program was not assisting nearly enough refugees because of confusing and often contradicting policies. Ayman suggested that all registered refugees should be eligible for food assistance, particularly since Iraqi refugees are barred from working in Syria. The argument halted when the Ireland representative, Martin Gallagher, interrupted, rebuffed the two for such a display, and noted that while it was important for donors to understand the constraints and issues, such arguments should be confined to the Country Team because "no

one wants to see how sausages are made." (Note: Post has recieved word through UNHCR contacts, that since the donor trip and the visit of the WFP Director in the same week, WFP has decided to double its target supply from 100,000 Iraqi refugees to 200,000 in 2008, on the assumption that UNHCR will be registering an average 12,000 refugees per month over the next year. Working with UNHCR, WFP is looking to make its criteria more inclusive. The budgetary implication of this decision are that WFP will be looking to donor to provide some \$30 million. End Note.)

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SARG Hampering Efforts  
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¶11. (C) Expressing a recurring theme throughout the entire program, representatives criticized the slow speed with which the Syrian government is moving to allow NGO operation within the country. All donor countries wanted the international NGOs to begin work and start assisting immediately; yet the SARG had been dragging its feet on an MOU to allow them to operate within Syria. Donors acknowledged that UNHCR was bogged down with implementing assistance to refugees, when it should be focused on registering and pinpointing the needs of Iraqis.

¶12. (C) Many argued the establishment of robust NGO programs would go a long way to unburden the UNCHR and allow them to focus on their prescribed mission according to the donors. The Syrian government claimed (and has been for months) that this MOU is set for imminent release; the donors privately expressed disbelief over these comments. The Danish Ambassador said that there was growing skepticism in many Western capitals, which were sensing that the extent of the crisis could not be so pressing if the SARG was moving so slowly.

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Gap Between Donors and IOs  
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¶13. (C) Comment: Notwithstanding the UNHCR's laudable efforts to inform donors and pull together various international organizations, its two-day presentation achieved only modest progress on both fronts. The plight of Iraqi refugees in Syria will continue to remain relatively un compelling to donor countries because it lacks the aura of

a natural disaster-like crisis (such as specter of large overcrowded camps) that would capture the attention and sympathy of Western nations. This public awareness problem perhaps can be addressed if a more accurate and reliable head-count of Iraqi refugees can be captured along with an accurate picture of refugee needs. UNDP acknowledges that this effort will take time to quantify the magnitude of the crisis.

¶14. (C) Many donor reps left Damascus with the impression that UNHCR is soliciting funds based off the projected needs of 1.5 million refugees rather than the needs of those registered and targeted for registration in 2008, roughly 250,000 in total. Donors indicated that they took no issue supplying aid for those actually registered (or soon to be), but did express their discomfort with fully funding UNCHR appeals, particularly when international NGOs are not operating in country and UNHCR does not have the capacity to assist untold hundreds of thousands (even if the donors were to fully fund the appeals) without NGO support. Donors are keen to see what NGOs are capable of doing to support UNHCR. Meanwhile, the Syrian government's strong preference remains direct assistance and strict control over NGOs. UNHCR requires more donor funds but there is donor hesitation given the lack of domestic partners and international NGOs to adequately provide assistance to the Iraqi refugees here.

CORBIN